

A Foreword by Plunger Historian Rudolph G. Barlow

I begin this volume with a central question for many readers of this timely text: What is Plunger Press? In this thoughtful volume, various notables of our day will tackle this simple yet infinitely vast query. But for now, let us start from the beginning. Most readers will no doubt be familiar with many of Plunger's more well-known products: The Famous Folks Flashcard Set, the Election Machine Toolkit, or perhaps the First Lady Toilet Seat Cover. Many will own affordable reproductions of images from the Home Preservation Series or will have browsed the interactive project archive on Plunger's website.¹ But how many have considered what Plunger is truly about at heart? Most who have encountered the packaged visages of corporate/political leaders printed onto easily consumable items will have looked no further than the simple explanation that: a) Plunger's focus on present day political figures is an indication of Plunger's interest in documenting the faults of the personalities and spectacle of current politics, or b) Plunger seeks to illustrate that politicians are like products.²

I pose though that Plunger engages with a much more far-reaching task than purely the illustration and critique of political life in America today. In actuality, Plunger's interest lies in showing that the commodity nature of these political events and figures represents a relationship between the consumption of politically supported ideologies and the consumption of goods.³ The true focus of Plunger's critical analysis is not the daily newsworthy political spectacle, but rather the framework of consumption-based society and the ingrained (or trained) human desire to consume ideology. Advertising executive J. Walter Thompson stated in 1906, "All ages have been ages of faith...disbelief requires an effort of will, while belief requires only acquiescence. Advertising turns human faith into an asset."⁴ Thompson aptly notes the popularity of belief in ideology but fails to note that disbelief, through the effort of will required to oppose to an existing belief, forms the foundation of another belief-driven ideological system. The focus of popular political criticism on the correctness of one ideology over its equal/opposite avoids the consideration of ideology in and of itself as the essential social problem.⁵ In its productions, Plunger seeks to address the historical foundation and present-day manifestations of ideological consumption, the "location" of power in the ability to control the production and distribution of ideology, and the corporate/political manipulation of the human need to believe.

Statements emerging from Plunger itself often simply relate the main Plunger agenda as "to highlight the interdependence of politics and consumerism."⁶ We must ask then the puzzling question: Though the product visually communicates a larger consideration, why have we never heard Plunger's talented researchers and designers articulate the much more complex and engaging position I describe above? Why is there no public record

1 Plunger's website can be found online at www.plungerpress.com.

2 As Robert Westbrook so aptly points out in "Politics as Consumption: Managing the Modern Election", the contemporary trend to commoditize the politician in fact dates to the beginning of the twentieth century and corresponds to the rise of contemporary consumer culture. See his essay in Richard Wrightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears' *From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1920*, Random House, 1983.

3 Or to state it differently: the consumption of politics relates to the politics of consumption.

4 For the full text of this statement, see the *Blue Book*, 1906.

5 The popular desire to consume ideology, which can also be called more simply "belief", becomes socially problematic in its use by corporate entities to manipulate the population.

6 See Plunger statement 1026A in Appendix C.

of a statement from Plunger of this sort? The answer lies in that such a statement would constitute a clear declaration of ideology, the very topic that I assert that Plunger is critiquing in its productions. Since Plunger has set as its task the exploration of the problematic human need to consume ideology, it would be less than proper for Plunger to present a straight-forward statement of its own ideology. Thus, amidst deafening silence from those at the heart of the Plunger project, it falls to us, the historians and academicians, to decode the real agenda behind Plunger Press and to lay it out for the consumption of the interested masses in this insightful compendium. In the following five essays, you will hear the voices of well-known and revered minds of today bringing academic tradition to bear on a hotly contested topic, making clear the unclear, and expounding at great length to demystify the elusive Plunger Press.

Where did consumerism begin and where do politics end? To begin to address this question, we might turn to the words of that great social-economist, Siegfried Veldt, "The political end game begins with the consumer."⁷ So with that in mind, let us turn our attention to the contents of this captivating volume. We begin with marketing analyst Janice Markop's examination of the workings of consumer typologies in Plunger Press productions. Then advertising historian C.T. Simon Bradley presents an extended look at Plunger's relationship to corporate Public Relations and Advertising tactics. Feminist Critic Nadine Arling-Hall analyses the role of gender in Plunger's Home Preservation Series through the lens corporate nomadic tactics. Philosophy Professor Arthur Snelling unpacks the Ideological Production Toolkit, demonstrating how Plunger uses and subverts corporate methods for ideological production. To conclude, Art Historian Marsha Benson considers the relationship of historic and present day corporate art practices to Plunger's recent productions. This volume contains not only the writings of five prominent academics and theorists from various fields on the subject of "The Political Product in Consumer Culture" as it relates to Plunger Press, but as well a thorough catalog of the recent Plunger exhibition, an insightful history of Plunger Press, and documentation of statements and publications emerging from Plunger itself.

This long awaited volume celebrates not only the recent exhibition, but also years of Plunger's production of image-based product that highlights the relationship of politics to consumerism, and the consumption of goods to the consumption of ideology. It is my hope that this volume will do much to inform the public about the workings of Plunger Press and to clarify the many questions that those who have experienced Plunger product may wish to have answered.

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7 This relevant quotation and many more can be found in *Great Quotations from Social-Economic History: A Bathroom Reader*, Carol and Ron Schmidt, eds., Dover/Andover Press, 1999, p. 52.